

SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION IN LIGHT OF THE INCLUSION PRINCIPLE

An Exploratory Study of Special Needs Education Practice in Belarusian and Norwegian Preschools

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate possible practical consequences of the ideological principle of inclusion. In this article, we investigate, compare, and discuss how employees of Norwegian and Belarusian preschools perceive their own, and their preschools', special needs education practices related to children with language difficulties. This study has a qualitative case design. The investigation contains 10 semi-structured interviews of 5 employees from 5 preschools in each country.

The analysis of the empirical material shows that the interviews primarily revolve around two topics: *competence* and *sense of mastery and self-understanding*. Among the staff of the Norwegian preschools, perceptions of a relatively low average competence, unsatisfactory guidance from external professionals, and a low sense of mastery, are prevalent. The informants from Belarusian preschools perceive a high and more specialised competence, available special needs education competence, and a high degree of sense of mastery.

Despite different situations and contexts, this study suggests that the preschool sector in both countries face the same challenge; how preschools can implement a form of inclusive educational practice, without at the same time relinquishing valuable special needs education competence.

Keywords: Inclusion, special needs education practice, language difficulties, preschool, staff, competence.

Introduction

Societal development in general leads to views of children and childhood changing over time (Larsen and Slåtten 2014). As a result, preschools undergo a process of continuous change and development. At the core of recent years' development internationally is the principle of inclusion. This principle is embedded i.e. in the U.N. *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), in UNESCO's *The World Declaration on Education for All* (1990) and *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality* (1994),

which have all contributed to shaping the development of the preschool sector in many countries.

The increased international focus on inclusion means special needs education practices are experiencing great change and development in many countries. In Norway, extensive reforms have been carried out, discontinuing segregated preschools and schools in favour of more inclusive educational facilities for children with special educational needs (or, children with SEN) (Haug 2010; Solli 2012; Solli and Andresen 2012). In Belarus, the first steps are being made towards more inclusive special educational assistance for children with SEN (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus (MOE) 2015).

In Norway and Belarus alike, language difficulties (or LD) represent one of the more common challenges for preschool staff. Both countries report a need for increased commitment to quality and competence in preschools, in order to avoid further growth in numbers of children with SEN (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training 2014; MOE 2014, 2015). This implies that both countries recognise preschool as a key arena in working towards a more inclusive society.

The purpose of this investigation, which serves as part of a more comprehensive study in both countries, is to critically examine possible connections between an increased focus on the ideological principle of inclusion, and the special needs education practices in Norwegian and Belarusian preschools. The question under study is:

How do the employees perceive and describe their own, and their preschools', special needs education practices for children with language difficulties?

Earlier Research

A study from eight European countries indicates that about 80 – 90% of children and youths today are in an inclusive education setting (Ferguson 2008). It has been documented that children with SEN seem to benefit more from inclusive education in heterogeneous groups than they do from segregated education in homogeneous groups (ibid. 2008; Haug 2010). Some studies indicate that it is difficult to establish a 100 % inclusive practice in which all children take part in the same educational and social activities (ibid 2008; ibid 2010; Vargas-Baròn et al. 2009).

Several studies indicate that there is a connection between the quality of education in preschools and the competence of the staff, both in terms of inclusion and special educational

assistance (Ceglowski et al. 2002; Engel et al. for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2015; Melhuish 2001; Sheridan 2009).

The research literature from Norway and Belarus indicates that preschoolers with SEN have very variable access to special needs education competence, and face very diverse perceptions of the inclusion principle (Aspøy and Bråten 2014; Brandlistuen et al. 2015; Engvik et al. 2014; Gajdukevich 2013; Haug and Steinnes 2011; MOE 2015; Steinnes and Haug 2013; Svetlakova 2013; Varenova 2009; Vargas-Baròn et al. 2009:49).

Language difficulties is a specific challenge that denotes problems with both the expressive, impressive and pragmatic aspects of language. The diagnosis is included in the World Health Organisation (WHO) *International Classification of Mental Disorders* (ICD-10). This diagnosis manual is the basis for clinical and special educational practice both in Norway and Belarus. According to ICD-10, one of the criteria for the diagnosis is that the LD are primary in nature, and cannot be explained by any other issue. Without adequate assistance, the children may develop both behavioural, social, school-related and mental problems (Bishop 2014; Leonard 2014).

Because of the complexity of the diagnosis and the early age of the children, common practice is that pre-schoolers are granted special education assistance without a formal diagnosis to follow (Ball 2011; Bele 2008; Bishop 2014). Thus, this article illuminates preschool employees' experiences from working with children receiving special education assistance due to LD assumed to be compatible with the official diagnostic criteria.

The Norwegian and Belarusian Context

Both in Norway and Belarus, the supreme goal for preschool activities is contributing to children's development, learning and formation, so that they may be inducted into, participate in, and contribute to society (Code on Education in the Republic of Belarus (CE) Art. 2; Kindergarten Act §1).

Inclusion is recognised as an overarching principle for all education in both countries. In Norway, it is already well established as a fundamental principle of all activities in the entire education sector, while Belarus is in an initial phase of a process towards a more inclusive form of education (Arnesen 2012; Starzinskaja 2011).

Both countries have a statutory right to special educational assistance for children with SEN, and recognise the competence of the staff as one of the key resources in the effort to secure

children's well-being and development in preschool (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2013; MOE 2015).

The Norwegian Preschool Sector

According to Norwegian public policy documents, key words for overarching values, goals and principles of education are: *equality, early effort, inclusion, individual adaptation, diversity* and *reducing social inequalities*. Furthermore, preschool should “recognise the value of childhood (...) contribute to joy and wellbeing in playing (...)” and “further democracy and equality” (Kindergarten Act, §1).

Through a series of educational reforms in the 1990s, state special schools and other forms of segregated educational facilities were discontinued. All children attend ordinary preschools, most often in their local area (Buli-Holmberg 2008).

Children who, according to expert assessment, need adapted support or education, have a statutory right to *special educational assistance*. Parents may individually, or in consultation with the preschool, request that the *educational and counselling service* (PPT) – an independent, expert authority – assess their children's need of special education assistance. Based on the PPT expert assessment, the preschool owner makes a decision, granting or denying special education assistance. This decision may be appealed, and is legally binding in the event of a lawsuit. Even though it is not mandatory by law, the local governments usually oblige preschools to develop individual education plans (IOP). These describe the goals, content and organisation of special education. The children's benefit and need of special education are evaluated yearly (Law on education in Norway Ch. 5).

It is most often preschool staff who carry out these special needs education activities. They are individually adapted, but included in ordinary preschool education. Employees of the PPT, the *National Educational Service* (Statped) and other external competence agencies contribute with educational guidance in various phases.

The preschool is required to have proper administrative and professional management. The manager must be trained as a preschool teacher, or have similar formal competence within children and education; however the local government may grant exemption from this requirement (Kindergarten Act §17).

The lack of qualified professionals appears to be one of the greatest challenges to the preschool sector. In 2013, 43.5% of Norwegian preschool staff lacked formal training at a higher

educational level (Engel et al. 2015). Additionally, between 50% and 60% feel a need to increase their competence in order to do a satisfactory job with regard to children with SEN (Gotvassli et al. 2012). In recent years, the government has focused on reaching their goal of full preschool coverage. Simultaneously, they have implemented several measures both to increase the competencies of employees, and to increase the number of applicants to preschool teacher education.

The Belarusian Preschool Sector

All education and teaching in Belarus should be based on international standards and humanist values. Beyond this ideological foundation common to both countries, it is further stated that teaching and education in general should: *be strongly prioritised, be available to all, and be based on national culture and traditions* (CE Art. 2).

In 2012, the government adopted a new national plan for special education, in which the principle of inclusion was introduced (MOE 2012). This was followed, in 2015, by new guidelines for implementing the inclusion principle in three phases between 2015-2020 (MOE 2015).

Belarusian preschools may be classified in three general categories. First, the ordinary preschools, which do not enrol children with SEN. Second, the special preschools, which only enrol children with SEN. Finally, there are ordinary preschools that in various ways have integrated groups of children with certain learning impairments or disabilities.

About 70% of all children receiving special educational assistance are being aided in segregated groups for children with similar disabilities, which are integrated in ordinary preschools (MOE 2014). National education plans and programs have been elaborated for educating children with various types of difficulties, and are being used in their education (MOE 2012).

Children's right to special educational assistance during preschool age is statutory (CE Art.14). Based on psychological, medical and educational assessment at a regional centre, *The Correction and Development Training and Rehabilitation Centre* (DC), the child's need of special educational assistance is assessed. In collaboration with the parents, DC advises on what educational program and which preschool is better suited for their child (CE Art. 279 and Art. 265).

The preschool coverage in Belarus is estimated at 74, 4 % for children aged 1-6 and 100 % for the 5-year-olds (MOE 2015). The manager is required to have proper competence. 43, 9 % of preschool employees lack formal training at a higher level. In order to administer special educational assistance, however, relevant and specific professional competence at a high level is required (CE 2011; MOE 2014; Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Belarus 2001).

Design and Method

In order to ensure the suitability of a comparative approach to analysis, we selected a case design, with one case from Norway and one from Belarus (Yin 2014). A comparative approach may hold various methodological challenges. With regard to the issue of validity, it may be natural in this context to give special attention to the three aspects *linguistic*, *contextual* and *organisational equivalence* (Backström-Widjeskog and Hansén 2002). Linguistic equivalence concerns understanding each other where different languages are present. This study involves use of the three languages Norwegian, Russian and English. In this process, we have discussed professional terminology and other terms with competent colleagues from Norway and Belarus. Throughout the study, our own multi-cultural background and knowledge of the field involved in both cases have proved useful resources, contributing to furthering validity. Contextual equivalence concerns making the material and results understandable and comparable across the cases. This is catered to through descriptions of each context. Organisational equivalence refers to challenges comparing systems that are organised in different ways in separate cases (ibid. 2002). This is attended to i.e. by making a strategic selection of preschools and informants. In Norway, we selected preschools that enrol children with language difficulties. In Belarus, we selected preschools with integrated groups of children with language difficulties. In both cases, we recruited staff members who do daily work with these children. This ensures that the experiences of the employees in both cases refer to corresponding and comparable phenomena.

Furthermore, we have strived to ensure the validity of this investigation by presenting and discussing parts of the study at various seminars, and with some independent scientists on other occasions. Even though cases and sample sizes in this investigation are very limited, the results may still, in certain contexts, have *analytical* (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015:291) and *inductive* generalisability (Yin 2014).

Recruiting, Sampling and Interviews

We were looking for informants that could reflect on the topic of the interviews based on their own experiences. Thus, a criterion was that the participants in this investigation had relevant experience from the practice field (Johannessen et al. 2010). After having the research project registered and approved by the Data Protection Official for Research, Norwegian Social Sciences Data Service (NSD), the work on recruiting informants started.

We contacted relevant preschools by telephone and email. Preschools and staff who were interested in the project were given further information, both oral and written, of all aspects of the investigation. All informants have given written consent to their participation.

Altogether, 10 informants from 5 different preschools in both countries were recruited. The sample from Norway consists of 1 man and 4 women aged 40 – 60. Three of the informants are preschool teachers with 3 years of college or university training. One of these had 1 year of further specialisation in special needs education from college/university level. The remaining two informants had upper secondary school education. All of them worked regularly in public preschools with children granted special educational assistance due to suspicion of LD. The preschools had, in total, between 26 and 120 children each.

The informants from Belarus consisted of 5 women aged 30 – 50. All had 4 years of university training; two as SEN teachers, one as a music teacher, one as a speech therapist, and one as a preschool teacher. All of them did daily work with groups of children with assumed LD, integrated in public preschools. The preschools had, in total, between 80 and 120 children each.

We had developed an interview guide based on principles of semi-structured interviews. Beforehand, we defined certain topics for the interviews. Among these were: the education background and professional interests of the employees, descriptions of practical identification and manifestations of LD, examples of activities and specific tasks, and key experiences or challenges from special educational work.

The introductory questions for each topic were, as far as possible, posed in the same way in all interviews, in Norwegian in Norway, and in Russian in Belarus. In order to ensure that the questions made sense in different circumstances, we had to adapt the formulations according to each interview situation. We also emphasized the importance of conducting the interviews in a manner which allowed the informants to define topics themselves in the course of the conversation.

All interviews were conducted at the preschool where the informant worked. Each interview lasted between 1 ½ – 2 hours. Audio recordings were made of all the interviews, and subsequently transcribed in their entirety in the respective native languages of the informants.

Analysis

The analytical approach is inspired by a *Constant Comparative Analysis method* (Corbin and Strauss 2008). This entails that the analysis of the data is conducted on three separate levels. First, the analysis was conducted on an individual level, that is, the data from each interview is analysed separately. Then, we conducted an analysis of the data material from each case. Finally, the entire data set was analysed across the two cases.

In order to ensure that the results of the analysis is empirically founded, we chose an *inductive approach* to the data while working on identifying categories (Johannessen et al. 2010). Throughout the process, we identified different categories from the employees' descriptions and perceptions of the special educational practice. As a result of the entire analytical process, 'competence' and 'sense of mastery and self-understanding' were identified as the two main categories in the data. Then, the transcripts from the interviews were analysed all over again to see if a *deductive approach*, based on the two defined categories from the data, would contribute to a deeper insight in the matter (Nilssen 2012).

Results

Below, the results of the two cases are presented in separate sections. In both sections, we first account for the staff's perceptions with regard to the two categories *competence* and *sense of mastery and self-understanding*. The results are elaborated and illustrated with examples, in the form of quoted statements from the interviews. The examples are selected because they are typical of a general perception across the sample. The letter 'N' parenthesised after a quote indicates that the statement belongs to a Norwegian employee, while the letter 'B' indicates a statement by an employee in Belarus. Underlined words in the quotes were stated with added weight.

Special Needs Education Practice in Norwegian Preschools

From the analysis of the data, it appears that two factors in particular, on the topic of competence, concerned the Norwegian staff. One deals with the employees' own competence, while the other relates to the competence they are – or should have been – able to access through guidance from external professionals.

Competence

The study showed that the staff shared a clear view that children with language difficulties really do need special educational assistance and follow-up. It was further found that they would very much like to help these children themselves, but they were often unsure what to do, and how to do it:

‘I do want to help them, but I haven’t really worked a lot with language training’ (Kari, assistant, N).

Regardless of whether they have special needs education competence, the employees are responsible of conducting planned special needs education activities in practice. They often perceive this as a challenging and frustrating burden:

‘It really hurts. You feel like you’d really, really like to help them, but then you don’t know what to do...’ (Martin, preschool teacher, N).

The study also shows that the general lack of qualified and stable staff may limit the practical utility of special needs education competence in the preschool staff. Oda, for example, as the only one in her preschool, had one year of further education in special needs education as well as a preschool teacher’s degree. The situation she describes, however, shows how being the sole holder of relevant competence limits its practical value:

‘(...), but how many places can you really be at once? I can’t both stay with the children who are supposed to practice, and... When there’s 20 other kids there, with two adults – and one of them has never set foot in a preschool before, and the other one is an old lady!’ (Oda, preschool teacher w/special needs education, N).

In general, the employees emphasised how important it is that everyone in the preschool, at any given point, both knew what to do, and felt competent enough to perform the tasks they were given. The study suggests a somewhat unclear division of labour and responsibilities among the preschool staff.

The experiences of the staff further suggest that it takes too long from an inquiry is sent until they receive help, in the form of assessment or guidance from the PPT. As the below statement makes clear, it seems that the long latency may cause some children not to receive the special educational assistance they need – and are legally entitled to:

‘We should really ... There’s just so many kids we would like to work a little more with, but it takes so long that I don’t know if there’s any point in reporting it ... (to the PPT) ...’ (Ina, assistant, N).

The employees experience difficulty relying on a service that is hard to access. This is expressed in different ways in the empirical data. One example is the following statement, showing that this feeling holds true for high-competence staff as well:

‘And she (the child) had to be assessed, (...)! I told the speech therapist that I could maybe just start her on N’s (the name of another language-impaired child) scheme? But no, that I could not do! I couldn’t just do a general, like..., and bring her (the child) along playing games and such! (...) She (the speech therapist) first had to assess which sounds she (the child) couldn’t actually do! And it would of course take some time before the speech therapist could come, because first we would have to apply, and then we would have to wait, and then... yes! (Oda, preschool teacher w/ special needs education, N).

A low average level of education among preschool staff contributes in various ways to increasing the need of external competence. With more untrained assistants, more staff members need more frequent and thorough guidance:

‘In most cases, the assistants help carry out practice, but then some more follow-up is required. We have guidance meetings every other week, one hour forty-five minutes, and that is not enough time for us to start any training on what we do...’ (Ina, assistant, N).

A general lack of stability and competence in the staff, combined with inadequate – in the sense: not frequent enough – guidance from external expertise, also seems to undermine continuity in special needs education in preschools:

‘But the way it has become now, that this speech therapist is here once every month or every other month, it is really not possible to make sure everyone can attend the one meeting with her (the speech therapist), and get a joint review ... There’s so little continuity ...’ (Ina, assistant, N).

The statements from several employees indicate that the guidance system has worked better before:

‘Before, the SEN teachers came several times a week, and helped do these ... We could get so much quicker correction. And sometimes we practiced (with the children) while the SEN teacher watched, while other times it was the other way around (...). It was a totally different kind of follow-up!’ (Anja, preschool teacher, N).

Sense of Mastery and Self-Understanding

The challenges of working with special needs education, as described above, seems to influence the staff’s perceptions of themselves and their own special needs education practice in different ways. As shown by the below statement, the staff worry that the children may suffer the consequences when preschools are not able to begin special needs education soon enough:

‘I know I’ve learned that it’s a good idea to get started as early as possible, and that just waiting and waiting is not such a good idea. And that’s also something that I’ve been thinking all along, that we can’t wait for help, we just kind of have to begin somewhere, and start helping.’ (Oda, preschool teacher w/special needs education, N).

The staff seemed tormented by the idea that a lack of special needs education may influence the children’s opportunities for development negatively, both in the short and long run:

‘The real shame is that, as months and years pass by, the kid is the real loser. And: as the kids disappear off to school, you keep thinking; wonder what happened to him or her? How are they doing? It’s not a good feeling to send off a kid like that, who you feel you should have done more to help, but ...’ (Anja, preschool teacher, N).

A lack of special education competence among the staff, and inadequate follow-up from the counselling service, seems to affect the employees’ self-esteem negatively. The way the employees describe themselves and their situation is characterised by helplessness, despondency, and failing motivation to keep working with the children:

‘And then it’s easy to take on the burden yourself. But you think about it when you go to bed at night. And – the first thing that you think about the morning after is; what are we going to do about that kid? That part is actually a heavy load!’ (Anja, preschool teacher, N).

This feeling seems equally strong, if not stronger, with Oda. Even though she is a trained preschool teacher, and has further education within special needs education, she was very critical of her own competence and practice, due to her lack of specialisation within the subject of language difficulties:

‘There are a lot of kids here that I would like to work a bit more with, but right now I’m in a place where I don’t know what’s the right thing to do anymore, because I don’t know these things the way speech therapists do ...’ (Oda, preschool teacher w/special needs education, N).

Even though the employees do their best to follow up on expert guidance with regard to conducting, following up and evaluating special needs education activities, the study shows that the practice of the counselling service seems to have some unintended negative consequences as well:

‘When I think he (the child) has made progress with this and that, then ... (sighing and exhaling heavily before continuing) ... the speech therapist comes along and says: “No, I don’t think this is good enough!” (Ina stops to wipe away tears before continuing) I feel – maybe – like I wish I knew more and had more experience. (...) In the end it’s me who hasn’t done a good enough job. Yes... it is, isn’t it?’ (Ina, assistant, N).

Special Needs Education Practice in Belarusian Preschools

The same main topics emerged from the analysis of the empirical material both in Belarus and Norway. As stated in the below presentation, we found that the employees’ perceptions of their own competence and special needs education practice in Belarus were very different from what was found in Norwegian staff. In the following statements, the job title ‘defectologist’ is sometimes used. We chose to keep this term in translations when informants used it, even though the title is now officially changed to ‘special educational needs teacher’ (Vargas-Barón et al. 2009).

Competence

The informants from Belarus consistently have significantly higher and more specialised competence than the Norwegian informants do. As shown by the first two statements below, the staff regard this competence as a key prerequisite for good special needs education practice:

‘As a specialist, I know exactly what this child needs, and I do targeted work based on this knowledge. I have knowledge both of children’s development and of language difficulties, which gives me the opportunity to create an individually adapted scheme for each child’ (Lida, defectologist, B).

‘We are, after all, specialists, and we hope and believe that our competence and knowledge will help these children.’ (Anna, speech therapist, B).

Not all of the preschool staff held this high and specialised competence. This is not, however, seen as a problem, something that in part seems to be due to both good cooperation and a clear division of labour and responsibility among the staff. Olga, a specialist herself, stated the following:

‘As a defectologist, I am in charge of both individual activities and group activities. I plan sessions, and cooperate with preschool teachers every day. They are trained by me.’ (Olga, defectologist, B).

While Natallia, who did not have any education beyond that of a preschool teacher, stated:

‘I don’t have the expertise of a defectologist or a speech therapist, but they are the ones working with these children every day. The rest of us just help out. (...) (Natallia, preschool teacher, B).

Natallia continued with a reflection showing that the staff regard available specialist competence as a key to success in working with special needs education:

‘Usually, we collaborate very closely with speech therapists and defectologists. They are after all at the preschool every day (...). If we collaborate closely, and all parties are interested, we can get these children up to normal language function within two years (...). Just imagine, then many of the children may start their education at an ordinary school!’ (Natallia, preschool teacher, B).

As a natural consequence of the clear focus on the value of professional competence, the Belarusian staff were very interested in developing and updating their own professional competence and teaching practice. However, there was a challenge in that the employees themselves would have to pay for various courses, course materials, instruments, and other tools they thought useful in language-stimulating work with children:

‘Improving my competence is very important in my job. I am interested in the subject of language difficulties. I read a lot and continually apply for new courses in order to raise my competence level. Unfortunately, I have to pay for this myself.’ (Lida, defectologist/SEN teacher, B).

The staff felt this could eventually impair both the quality of the education and the progression of the children, and this frustrated them immensely.

Sense of Mastery and Self-Understanding

With the one exception mentioned above, the staff in Belarus did not thematise any specific challenges in relation to working with special needs education in preschools. When we asked for specific examples of such challenges, we instead heard statements like this:

‘Challenges? Hmm ... I don’t really face any big challenges. I love my job. I can really say I think I know what I do well, and I think it’s exciting and interesting!’ (Natallia, preschool teacher, B).

‘You never see challenges if you love your job! (...) When I see the results of my work, and see that they are very good, it’s exciting to work!’ (Lida, defectologist, B).

The informants’ perceptions of themselves, their own competence and of the special needs education practice they are part of, seems to contribute to enhancing both their sense of mastery and their self-esteem, and this motivates them for further efforts in special needs education work with children:

‘I love children! It’s a really exciting job, and the more you invest in the child, the more joy you get from the work. Imagine; when the child manages to read a poem, when it can sing a song or tell you something! It’s a joyous occasion, it’s a true pleasure! (Starts crying) Those are the minutes I build my work as a defectologist on.’ (Olga, defectologist, B).

Summary

Despite the fact that preschools in Norway and Belarus are, in many ways, in very different circumstances, the analysis of the data showed that the staff in both countries focused on the same main topics in the investigation of special needs education practice in preschools. That said, the results of this study show clear differences between the staff’s perceptions of their own competence and of their preschool’s special needs education practice in the two countries.

In Norway, the preschool staff who conduct special educational assistance have, on average, a relatively low degree of formal competence. Many are assistants, some have a preschool teachers’ education, and a few have further special needs education training. The staff acknowledge the children’s need of special educational assistance, but they depend on guidance from external professionals to conduct this work. The study indicates that the low competence

of the staff, combined with unsatisfactory guidance, leads to the staff experiencing considerable despair and frustration. Feelings of despondency and guilt seems to threaten the staff's motivation for special needs education work they seem to be very positive to from the outset.

Compared to Norway, the Belarusian staff in the kind of preschools we study have a higher, more specialised, and more available competence. In addition to unproblematic collaboration, it seems a clear division of labour and responsibility contributes to the employees feeling they master their jobs satisfactorily. They seem confident that they are doing a good job, and they have high self-esteem. This feeds their enthusiasm and motivation for working with special needs education.

Discussion and Conclusions

The study shows seemingly big differences between Norwegian and Belarusian preschools' commitment to special needs education competence in relation to children with LD. The most important findings may be briefly summarized thus: Norwegian preschools seem to be characterised by a high degree of inclusion and a low degree of special education competence, while Belarusian preschools seem to be characterised by a low degree of inclusion and a high degree of formal special education competence.

Looking at the ongoing debate over early childhood education and care in Norway, we observe that the tendency to polarise between the principle of inclusion on one hand and the ideal of individually adapted special needs education on the other, is not limited to the subject of LD. On the contrary, it seems this result is representative of a generally contradictory relationship between inclusion and special needs education. In this debate, it is pointed out that the inclusion principle leads to preschool activities being subjected to contradicting demands, which contributes to increase tension between inclusion and communality on one hand, and individually adapted special needs education on the other (Arnesen 2012).

On one hand, special needs education is criticised for assuming an overly narrow and diagnostically minded perspective, while special needs educational practice is criticised for – by way of its special and individually adapted measures – contributing to amplifying differences and increasing the stigma on certain children (Simonsen 2012). On the other hand, the strong focus on the inclusion principle is criticised for contributing to special needs education facilities becoming more fragmented, less visible, and harder to identify. As several special needs education programs are becoming more general, and more and more specialists are being replaced by generalists, a system that was established in order to maintain and

develop special needs education competence and special needs education facilities in practice, is now becoming pulverised (Haug 2010).

The study portrays the experts in the Norwegian counselling system as distant and remote in relation to special education practice in preschools. Furthermore, it seems that preschools lack systems and procedures that enable them to maintain and share special education competence among the staff. Consequentially, employees that do have formal special education competence realistically remain solitary in this respect. In the professional debate of educational practice in Norwegian preschools it is pointed out that the division of labour in preschools is less ruled by formal competence and education, than it is by organizing each working day. Further, preschool activities are criticized because the educated preschool employees lack legitimacy, and are not recognized and heeded for their professional knowledge and formal competence (Steinnes and Haug 2013).

Compared to the material from Norway, there is a conspicuous absence of critical reflection in the interview material from Belarus. Combined with the fact that higher education generally leads to higher social status, this probably contributes to the employees maintaining a high level of self-esteem and sense of mastery related to their work. However, from the debate over early childhood education and care in Belarus, there is a reported lack of competence that may contribute to maintaining the diversity of children in ordinary preschools. It is further noted that there is a need both to increase special education competence in general, and increase consciousness of the inclusion principle among educators (Bal 2011, Gajdukevich 2013; MOE 2012; Varenova 2009, 2013; Vargas-Baròn et al. 2009). Critical voices have characterised the current special needs education practice as ‘manipulative and disciplinarian’ in relation to the target of inclusive education (Starzinskaja 2011). Others criticise the system for being characterised by rigid formalism, ever decreasing flexibility and increasingly rigid procedures; by uniformity and conformism; and by a lack of opportunities for individual choice and independent initiatives (Vargas-Baròn et al. 2009). Many point out that too much control over the development, without adequate room for self-criticism and new ideas, means there is a danger that stale understandings and practices are reproduced. This will not take preschools any closer to the goal of greater equality, increased diversity and more inclusion (European Commission 2013).

This review of central points of view and arguments in the academic discussions on inclusion and special needs education practices in Norwegian and Belarusian preschools seems, largely,

to reinforce the main result of our investigation. In the case of Norwegian preschools, this primarily means that the preschools do not seem to have adequate special needs education competence, while in the case of Belarusian preschools, it primarily means a lack of consciousness of the inclusion principle.

Despite the differences, the investigation of the Norwegian and Belarussian preschools point to a common challenge. This may be stated as a question of how to carry out an inclusive form of educational practice, without at the same time relinquishing valuable special educational competence. As there is a connection between competence and quality of education, it is likely that satisfactory educational practice is dependent both on adequate special educational competence and on adequate knowledge of the inclusion principle. This study suggests that both organisational reforms and competence requirements for staff positions may be effective measures that the government may employ to guide development in the preschool sector towards a more inclusive and competent special educational practice.

There are, however, several limitations to the results of this study. As the purpose was to get detailed insight into the individual experiences of employees, the investigation was limited to a relatively small set of informants, a few preschools, and one particular kind of difficulty, LD. More studies, larger samples and a broader focus will contribute to greater insight both regarding the educational practice of preschools and the relationship between special educational competence and the principle of inclusion. This may, hopefully, be useful both for children, preschool employees and the political government responsible for shaping the educational policies of future preschools.

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